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TAGS: PGOV PREL KDEM VE
SUBJECT: INSULZA INVITES LEDEZMA TO WASHINGTON

REF: CARACAS 850

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR FRANCISCO FERNANDEZ,
REASONS 1.4 (B) and (D)

¶1. (C) Summary: After securing salary payments for his supporters and getting the OAS's attention to his plight, Caracas Mayor Antonio Ledezma lifted his six-day old hunger strike. After days with little movement, there was a flurry of activity on July 7, with OAS Secretary General Jose Miguel Insulza calling Ledezma, and reportedly inviting opposition governors and mayors to meet with him in Washington, DC. The OAS's agreement to meet received front page treatment, after Ledezma's hunger strike, which began July 3, had been relegated to the back pages. Following Insulza's phone call, the Capital District office, run by Caracas Viceroy Jacqueline Farias, announced a transfer of 52 million BSF (about 24 million USD at the official exchange rate) to the Mayor Ledezma's office for payment of employee salaries. These were Ledezma's first victories since the April Capital District Law stripped him of authority and resources. The Government of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela's (GBRV's) quick reaction after Insulza's call suggests that they are sensitive to potential international pressure, especially as opposition leaders continue to draw a parallel between the events in Honduras with the GBRV's actions against opposition officials in Venezuela. End summary.

INSULZA CALLS LEDEZMA

¶2. (C) Heavy media coverage in major Venezuelan news outlets included detailed descriptions of Insulza's telephone conversation with Ledezma on July 7. Former Venezuelan Ambassador to the United Nations Milos Alcalay, responsible for international affairs in the Mayor's office, reported that Insulza had been concerned about Ledezma since the start of the hunger strike. Alcalay said that Ledezma emphasized to Insulza the need for a coordinated response to GBRV harassment of opposition governors and mayors, and said that in response Insulza had agreed to meet with the governors and mayors in OAS headquarters in Washington, DC.

GBRV TRANSFERS MONEY, LEDEZMA ENDS STRIKE

¶3. (C) One of the reasons highlighted by Ledezma for the hunger strike was the lack of payment to municipal workers. On July 6 Ledezma's Secretary of Finance, Hector Urgelles, said that the Greater Caracas municipality had not received from the Capital District 190 million BSF (88 million USD at the official exchange rate) needed for workers' salaries.

Initially the GBRV response was to accuse Ledezma of corruption (reftel), but in the evening of July 7 the new Capital District office, which usurped a large part of Ledezma's authority when established by law in April, sent a letter to Greater Caracas Mayor's office stating that 52 million BSF (about 24 million USD) would be deposited in the Municipality's accounts strictly for the payment of worker salaries in June and July. It concluded that this amount would be sufficient, because 11,290 of the municipality's workers, which number over 20,000, had been transferred to the Capital District and would be paid by directly by this new authority.

¶4. (SBU) On July 8 Ledezma and the other municipal workers announced the end to the hunger strike. Ledezma thanked the municipal workers who supported him during the strike, saying that "when you work together, and when you have deep convictions, you can achieve objectives worth the greatest sacrifice." Following a press conference given at the OAS headquarters in Caracas, Ledezma was driven in an ambulance to a local hospital for evaluation.

CHAVISTAS CALL THE STRIKE "A MEDIA SHOW"

¶5. (C) While students, civil society representatives, and major opposition leaders like Governor of Tachira Cesar Perez Vivas publicly supported Ledezma's strike, pro-government officials dismissed it. In the National Assembly, where PODEMOS political party member Saul Castellanos requested on July 7 that the legislature discuss the situation, United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) member Alberto Castello categorically rejected the proposal, calling the Ledezma's activities "a media show". Castello also said that he doubted that Ledezma was truly not eating. While municipality workers demonstrated outside of the National Assembly on July 7 in support of Ledezma, on July 8 several municipality workers protested against the hunger strike, accusing Ledezma of lying and not paying the workers.

¶6. (C) Comment: The passage of the law defining a new Capital District in April drastically diminished Ledezma's authority and resources. Ledezma's hunger strike appears to have raised attention, both domestically and internationally, about the issue. That the first concession from the GBRV to Ledezma concerned payment of workers' salaries is consistent with President Chavez's careful stewardship of his image as a supporter of the poor and working classes. The opposition, while slow to organize, eventually coordinated activities well, presenting multiple letters to the OAS member embassies in Caracas (reftel), ensuring renewed media coverage of the hunger strike after OAS engagement, organizing worker demonstrations, and using different opposition leaders to repeat the message that the OAS should respect democracy in Venezuela as it does in Honduras. As President Chavez and the GBRV have embraced the OAS as a legitimate institution responsible for protecting democracy from the coup in Honduras over the past week, it will be difficult for the GBRV to ignore or dismiss Insulza's decision to meet with opposition officials. End comment.

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